

IOWA OUTDOORS

Iowa Department of Natural Resources
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LEGIONS OF NORTHBOUND SNOW GEESE PROVIDE IOWANS WITH CLASSIC HUNTS

By Lowell Washburn
Iowa Department of Natural Resources

CORNING--"I HEAR GEESE!"

The excited proclamation came from Drew Kuckler, who was now up on his knees, anxiously scanning the March skies for the source of the sound. The sky search was soon joined by my son Matt, who had already flipped the power switch on his electronic game caller.

The three of us were spending our Saturday afternoon in a south central Iowa cornfield, laying smack in the middle of 450 snow white goose decoys. From my position, the scene resembled the aftermath from an explosion at the diaper factory. Our hope, however, was that from the air the ruse would pass as a believable imitation of noisily feeding snow geese.

As the distinct, high pitched yelping of traveling snow geese grew steadily louder, our visual search became increasingly intense. It was Matt who first spotted the approaching geese.

"There they are. Coming straight at us from the south," he announced.

Sure enough, a lined formation of geese had spotted our spread and was rapidly closing on the field. Utilizing the advantage provided by a brisk, 20-mph tailwind, the geese [I counted 41] sailed directly over the decoys and then quickly hooked back into

the breeze. Amazingly, there was none of the usual highly cautious circling -- just a straight line decent into the decoys. As the snows crossed the 20-yard line, we rose to fire.

At this point I'd like to say that it rained geese. The fact of the matter is that we only managed to connect with four birds before the flock fell back into the wind and was gone.

It didn't really matter though. For the next hour and a half we were treated to a true spring spectacular as flock after endless flock of migrating snow geese passed over our location. The day's final highlight occurred as we began to peel birds from a lacework pattern of flocks passing at an altitude of several hundred feet. As the interest in our decoys built, more and more snows joined the groups already working the spread. The scenario ended with three or four hundred birds attempting to land in the decoys.

Of all the continent's waterfowl, snow geese have become the most wary and difficult species to lure into decoys. It is indeed a rare day when you can get a large flock of to come within 10 yards or less of the spread -- but this was it. The noise was deafening, and it was a sight and sound that we'll cherish for a long time to come.

PERHAPS THE MOST INCREDIBLE ASPECT OF OUR HUNT was that it occurred just two weekends ago. Until recently, the idea of a spring goose hunt was something that waterfowl enthusiasts didn't even dream about. But as contemporary populations of lesser snow geese have continued to soar, the damage to fragile arctic nesting habitats has become intolerable.

"Total snow goose numbers have more than tripled during the past 30 years," says DNR waterfowl biologist, Guy Zenner.

"The fragile Canadian arctic, with its extremely short growing season cannot support goose populations of that size. Snow geese were literally eating themselves out of house and home, and something had to be done," Zenner said.

Scientists note that a full third of the vast arctic tundra is already destroyed, and that another third has been severely impacted. Were the damage stop immediately it could take a full century, perhaps more, for fragile plant life to recover.

In an effort to reduce the numbers of light geese, a special [conservation order] hunt was initiated in 1999. The goal of the emergency act was to reduce the 6 million bird [snow goose] flock by 50 percent. Special regulations allowed spring hunts, liberalized shooting hours and bag limits, unplugged shotguns, and the use of electronic calls. With the fifth year of special goose hunts currently underway, biologists are encouraged as the measure is showing preliminary signs of success.

"For the first time since records were kept, we are seeing the combined [regular and conservation order] harvest of snow geese reach or exceed one million birds," said

Zenner.

"In Iowa, success has fluctuated with weather conditions. During the past four seasons we have harvested anywhere from around 12,000 to over 29,000 geese during the special [conservation order] seasons.

"I think it is important to note that our combined annual snow goose harvest now represents about four times the average that occurred from 1988 to 1997. During 1999-2000, the regular light goose harvest in Iowa was only 11,300, but the bag during the conservation order period was 20,681, for a combined total of 31,981 geese," said Zenner.

"To me, the figures are extremely encouraging and suggest that, given the appropriate time and tools, hunters may just be able to bring this population under control."

Biologists predict that good numbers of snow geese, including an increasing number of juveniles, should continue to migrate through the state for the next two weeks.

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PHEASANTS SURVIVE 2002 – 2003 WINTER

By Joe Wilkinson

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

From the undergrowth and isolated remnants of melted snow last week, a hundred yards or so from the yard, it came. The unmistakable cackle of a rooster pheasant. It faded as he most likely took to the air, startled perhaps by a wandering dog or a puff of wind. But his proclamation proves he's out there.

It was a sound I didn't hear a couple years ago. Coming off a snow and ice covered winter, which proved to be the third harshest on record, Iowa pheasants didn't have much to crow about in 2001. And neither did the hunters. That killer winter led to an all-time low summer count and on to a record low harvest of 470,000 birds that fall.

Barring a spring blizzard—always a remote possibility in Iowa—pheasants and other upland game species came through the winter of '02-03, though, in pretty good shape. "Two years ago, we estimate we lost 70 percent of our pheasant brood stock," recalls Todd Bogenschütz, upland game biologist for the Department of Natural Resources. "Regardless of what happened that spring, we were facing a poor production year. We just didn't have the hens. This winter, it's been pretty mild, by Iowa standards. If the bad weather is past, I suspect we will have lost only about 10 percent of the brood stock."

That means more birds heading into the spring nesting season. If nesting conditions are good, Iowa's number one game species could finish the rebound begun last year. "What we want to see is normal rainfall, to a little bit to the 'dry' side," explains Bogenschutz as he looks ahead to the late May-June hatching period. "We also have the best production when temperatures run a little warmer instead of cooler." Cool, wet weather during the critical days after the hatch can cause heavy loss of chicks, due to exposure.

From there, those broods will try to avoid being eaten, while stuffing themselves with insects, seeds and waste grain. Good cover provides a pretty fair food base, but also protected areas, where pheasants are not as susceptible to predators.

As pheasant numbers bounce back, they still face a less hospitable landscape than the old Soil Bank days of the 1950s, or even the peak of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in the early '90s. Recovering wildlife populations will be knocked right back down, with another severe winter...or two. To improve recovery prospects, Bogenschutz points to a pair of pheasant-friendly USDA programs; the continuous buffer strip and the farmable wetlands programs. The buffer signup leaves strips of grassy cover along field waterways and streams. The wetlands exemption allows farm owners to enroll a small low spot, up to five acres, prone to periodic flooding, while cultivating the rest of a field. Either practice provides year-round cover for pheasants and other upland species.

Iowa's barometer comes in August, as 210 early morning surveys are conducted. Two years ago, they plummeted to about 15 birds per 30-mile route. Last year, the bounce back was to 32 birds. "Actually, last year, we were almost back to the numbers we had before that bad winter," admits Bogenschutz. "If the spring cooperates again this year, we could be up around 40, 50 birds a route again; well above levels of the last few years."

Lots of 'ifs', 'buts' and crossed fingers...but 2003's pheasant forecast is off to a *tentative* head start.

Snow Goose Migration Underway

Midweek rain and cold winds have slowed the snow goose migration. However, the flood of snows heading north has begun. "We had thousands and thousands of them flying over this past weekend with that warm weather," relates DNR wildlife technician Dennis Proctor. Proctor lives on the Hawkeye Wildlife Area, in northwest Johnson County. On Monday, 50,000 were reported at Riverton Marsh in southwest Iowa.

Again this year, a spring season is in place through April 15, to encourage heavier hunting pressure on Mid-Continent snow geese. Overpopulations of them are destroying their Hudson Bay nesting grounds. The Iowa DNR updates snow goose information at 712-387-2032.

April 3 Session Set to Comment on Local Goose, Deer Changes

Iowans get their chance to speak up about new proposed hunting regulations, April 3 from 7 to 9 p.m. at a public meeting, conducted via the Iowa Communications Network.

Proposed changes in deer rules include increasing the number of antlerless-only deer permits and expansion of the January deer season. Also on the agenda is a proposal to establish an early (September 1-15) Canada goose season and zones in Iowa City, Cedar Rapids and Des Moines. The DNR is also asking for an increase in the number of *fall* turkey licenses available to hunters.

“This is an opportunity for our hunters and people who support wildlife to give us some feedback,” said Richard Bishop, chief of the DNR's wildlife bureau. “We will go over the proposed regulations and take comments from anyone willing to speak. Then, if time remains, we will open the discussion to other topics.”

DNR wildlife staff will be at sites across the state to assist with the ICN session.

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PUBLIC INVITED TO FOURTH ANNUAL PRAIRIE RESCUE EVENT

Adults and kids are invited to help with the fourth annual Volunteer Prairie Rescue Workday Event, at the Loess Hills Forest Overlook, 5 miles north of Pisgah, in southern Monona County. Similar events are scheduled at Stone State Park, Sioux City, and Folsom Point, near Council Bluffs. All events will be held from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturday, April 12.

All rescue sites contain native prairie, a scarce resource in Iowa. At one time prairie covered nearly 80 percent of the state, but now 99 percent of Iowa's original prairie is gone. Though Iowa's prairies once maintained themselves through fire and other natural means, many of the remaining prairies require human intervention to keep them healthy.

“Many Iowans don't realize what beautiful natural resources we have, and what we have to lose, said Brent Olson, area forester for the DNR. “This is a rare chance for today's generation to get a taste of what our pioneer ancestors saw, and also gain appreciation for the diversity of the native prairie they are helping to save for future generations.”

The work will focus on cutting and removing invader trees and brush from Iowa's prairie remnants. Participants should dress in comfortable work clothes, bring work gloves and cutting tools like bow saws, saws or loppers. Volunteers should also bring

water and snacks, as amenities will be limited. Check with the site's contact person for site-specific details.

Loess Hills Forest Overlook
Brent Olson
712-456-2924
brent.olson@dnr.state.ia.us

Stone State Park
Kevin Pape
712-255-4698
kevin.pape@dnr.state.ia.us

Folsom Point
Susanne Hickey
402-558-8099
shickey@tnc.org

Though organizers hope participants will work for most of the 4-hour “rescue,” volunteers are welcome to come for shorter periods. People are also invited to come out simply to experience the prairie.

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FISHING REGULATIONS TO BE RELAXED AT LAKE ANITA

LEWIS – The Iowa Department of Natural Resources will relax some of the fishing regulations at Lake Anita beginning April 1, to allow anglers to harvest more fish before the lake is renovated in September.

Anglers will be allowed to use an unlimited number of hooks and lines to catch fish and to harvest any size and/or number of largemouth bass or channel catfish. All other general fishing regulations will remain in place. Liberalized fishing regulations for Lake Anita will be in effect through Sept. 1. However, anglers must still adhere to the being within visual sight of the lines.

Lake Anita will undergo a renovation project beginning in September to eliminate yellow bass. Yellow bass have taken over the fishery in Lake Anita and have negatively impacted panfish populations. Largemouth bass, bluegill, and crappie numbers are drastically reduced since introduction of yellow bass in 1995. The reduced number of panfish has lead to a reduction in the number of anglers fishing the lake, which in turn reduces the economic benefit to area communities.

Following the renovation, largemouth bass, bluegill, redear sunfish, and channel catfish will be restocked in early October. Crappies will be stocked in 2005 after the bass population is established. It is important for anglers not to transport any yellow bass they catch to other lakes or streams.

Anglers will still be required to have a valid fishing license and follow all other park rules.

For more information contact Lake Anita State Park personnel at (712) 762-3564, Cass County Conservation Officer, Eric Sansgaard at (712) 250-0303, or the District Fisheries Office at (712) 769-2587.

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